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Assaults on residents, staff on the rise at state-run Woodward Center

More assaults on residents, staff reported at state facility

By LEE ROOD

REGISTER STAFF WRITER

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Woodward, Ia. — Heads butted. Blood shed. Consciousness and eyesight temporarily lost.

In the year since her 21-year-old son Travis had moved to Woodward Resource Center, Sharon Mulloy had learned about so many violent attacks involving one of his mentally disabled housemates that she began to fear for those living and working there. After several workers transferred, she said, she began making appeals to have the man moved elsewhere at the state-run institution.

"I did not want Travis or the staff to be at risk of harm anymore," said the Bettendorf woman, who heard about the attacks from workers and her son.

Woodward's solution?

Last week, Mulloy learned that arrangements had been made to transfer her son out of the cottage, a move she said that did nothing to protect people from the resident's outbursts.

"I was jumping-up-and-down furious," she said. "They never even consulted me."

Although seldom publicized, assaults — violent and sexual — are commonplace today at Woodward, a sprawling campus of brick buildings and cottages that was built almost 100 years ago for people with epilepsy and the "feeble-minded."

Attacks like the sexual assault this spring of a 17-year-old girl by a prison inmate on break from a work crew make occasional headlines. Lesser known, however, has been the rising number of worker injuries and client abuse reports to sheriff's officials, advocates for residents and Woodward's administrators.

One reason for the growth in assaults is the portion of Woodward's population that is more violence-prone. Mixed among the roughly 260 residents on the 270-acre campus in recent years have been more serious sex offenders and violent predators with lower IQs, along with adults with profound retardation, youths with autism and mentally disabled victims of sexual abuse.

"We think it's pretty scary," said Sylvia Piper, who heads Iowa Protection and Advocacy, a federally chartered agency that monitors resident safety. "It would seem putting some of those people together with the most vulnerable folks would not be proper. As the diversity at Woodward has shifted, they have not been able to demonstrate that it is safe."

Reports of abuse, injuries increase

Last year, Iowa Protection and Advocacy, which receives voluntary reports from clients and their families, received 23 allegations of abuse and neglect of residents, a recent record. Worker injuries requiring medical attention also peaked at 126, as did resident-on-resident injuries requiring physician attention.

Mike Davis, Woodward's superintendent, said he believes the facility is doing a better job this year of minimizing risk to residents and staff members, while providing more challenging clientele with "a chance to have a life." Over time, he said, he believes that injuries are becoming less severe.

"Overall, I think things are going pretty good right now," he said. "Given the folks we serve, this is a safe place."

Davis said new training this spring aimed at limiting the once-widespread use of various types of physical or mechanical restraints on residents, along with several new hires that have helped staffing levels, should help limit injuries in the wake of a U.S. Department of Justice investigation.

A Woodward resident's death in a bathtub in 1999 helped prompt the probe into client safety that ended last year. Until then, according to investigator reports, residents routinely were injured — and some died — because they were improperly restrained in



DOUG WELLS/THE REGISTER

Worried mom: Sharon Mulloy of Bettendorf fears for the safety of her son Travis at the Woodward Resource Center. Mulloy says Travis, 21, was the victim of violent attacks involving one of his mentally disabled housemates. The facility transferred Travis to another cottage, a move Mulloy says does nothing to solve the problem.

different ways by workers.

Advocates say cases
indicate risk of harm

But some advocates, workers and parents like Mulloy point to troubling incidents this year as evidence that residents and staff remain at significant risk of harm. Among them:

- In January, guardians for a profoundly mentally retarded resident sued the state, alleging that the woman had contracted genital warts while in the institution's care. The woman, who was in her late 50s, had been completely dependent on the center's staff since the age of 3.

According to court records, a physician determined during a routine exam that the resident had a sexually transmitted disease.

The discovery later led to a finding of abuse by Iowa's Department of Inspections and Appeals, according to legal documents filed by the guardians.

However, the state is challenging the civil lawsuit and the inspectors' findings, saying in rare instances people contract what's called human papillomavirus, or HPV, from unsanitary conditions.

"The information we have obtained since really doesn't support that there has been any abuse, and definitely doesn't support the existence of any recent abuse," Davis said.

Piper and some legislators, meanwhile, say they believe any case of alleged sexual abuse should be handed over immediately for criminal investigation. Boone County Sheriff Ron Fehr said he was made aware of the incident, but Woodward never followed up with his requests for more information or requested a criminal investigation.

- In March, workers began reporting to the Boone County Sheriff's Department what became, over about two months' time, a half-dozen serious allegations of abuse by residents. According to sheriff's reports, one came from Michael Quinn, a staff member who worked in the same cottage as the violent resident who caused Sharon Mulloy concern.

Quinn asked that the Boone County prosecutor file multiple charges of assault and attempted murder against his attacker, providing a record of roughly 20 on-the-job injuries.

"I was told the legal system does not deem him competent to stand trial," said Quinn, who like several other staff members has since asked for - and received - a transfer to another cottage.

Davis said workers' compensation cases reported because of client aggression spiked at 14 or 15 in the spring, which was when a new policy forbidding resident restraint except in cases of imminent danger went into full effect. They have declined since, with two reported so far in July, he said.

- In April, a Des Moines mother who took her 16-year-old boy to Woodward for a weekend of respite care said she discovered upon her return that the teen had been sexually abused by another resident. Another mentally disabled client in the house allegedly performed oral sex on the retarded teenager while staff members were away, according to a sheriff's report and a legal claim filed against the state.

Davis said that Woodward's respite program meets all standards for supervision for such programs, but that youths are not monitored at all times.

James Biscoglia, an attorney for the boy in a legal action against the state, said Woodward's staffing that April weekend was "woefully short to prevent peer-on-peer sexual content."

Then came the alleged sexual assault of the teenage girl on May 17, involving an Iowa prison inmate who was supposed to be supervised as part of a work crew. After the attack, some parents were dumbfounded that state officials allowed a prison inmate on a campus filled with so many vulnerable residents.

"That's just insane," Mulloy said. "Who would sign off on something like that?"

Level of security
frustrates officials, staff

Sheriff Fehr, who routinely receives calls for help from Woodward, said he also lost patience with the lack of security on the campus that day. The sexual assault, he said, was just one of several incidents reported by staff members that afternoon.

Aggression between patients and employees has escalated, he said. Yet the facility has pared back its security to two officers.

"A lot more residents have assaulted the employees, but there isn't a whole lot you can do," he said. "Employees get upset that no charges are filed, and they become disgruntled. Some then become more abusive than they should be."

The day of the sexual assault, Fehr said, he decided to begin referring calls for service from Woodward staff to the Iowa State Patrol in Des Moines.

"The state is expecting the taxpayers of Boone County to cover all of its security issues," he said. "Ten to 15 years ago, they used to have regular patrols down there. They took care of everything in-house."

Family members and staff also have complained about inadequate security and lax supervision as more difficult residents have moved on and off campus.

Dangerous residents have wandered away from the grounds. Sexual predators have been accused of forcing themselves on roommates.

Among lawsuits pending against the facility is a wrongful death lawsuit alleging that 37-year-old resident Jesse McCulloch died in 2002 after being restrained and then placed in seclusion. Greg Landry, a lawyer representing McCulloch's estate, said staff members falsified records to cover up a failure to check on McCulloch every five minutes, as required, and thus failed to notice he had gone into cardiac arrest.

State considers changes,
sees improvements

In recent years, some staff and family members have insisted that Woodward needs a more secure building to temporarily house and provide intensive therapy to its most problematic residents or those in crisis.

A proposal drafted last year to create a new facility equipped with greater security and more supervision received hearty support from parents, caregivers and local authorities.

Last week, Iowa human services chief Kevin Concannon - who was chairman of the group that made the recommendation - said he now believes such a facility would be "a bad use of resources."

"I think we have bigger needs," Concannon said. "I wouldn't recommend that at this point in time."

Davis said that the use of physical restraints on residents is down 90 percent over last year, and that the staff is working hard to adapt to changes that will make the campus safer.

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